Nurture groups in Wales: A briefing from The Nurture Group Network

"... adverse experiences in childhood can have a toxic effect on mental wellbeing that remains long into adulthood...Health, housing, criminal justice, education and other public services all need to understand the lifelong importance of providing a safe and nurturing childhood." Professor Mark Bellis, Director of policy, research, and international development at Public Health Wales, quotes in the South Wales Argus, June 2016

What is a nurture group?

● An educational psychologist-designed, teacher-led intervention for disengaged and troubled children, which removes behavioural barriers to engagement and attainment in schools through re-creating missing or distorted early attachments. First developed in Hackney, London more than 40 years ago, there are now more than 2,000 nurture groups in nursery, primary and secondary schools across the UK.

● ‘Nurture children’ are carefully selected using the Boxall Profile, (a resource enabling teachers to develop a precise and accurate understanding of children’s emotional and behavioural difficulties and to plan effective interventions and support activities). Goals are set and outcomes are captured using the Boxall Profile, which is now online giving NGN access to this outcomes data.

● Once in the group, a nurturing philosophy rooted in attachment theory is used to ensure that children with social, emotional or behavioural difficulties are provided with the early nurturing experiences that are vital to learning. Nurture groups turn children’s lives around, ensuring no child is left behind, and are also an excellent ‘sharp end’ intervention, allowing teachers dedicated time and a framework through which to work with individual children to identify whether their needs could be met in school or if another course of action is necessary, such as an assessment for SEN support.

● In a survey of 100 NGN-accredited nurture groups, the majority of children have experienced significant trauma such as separation from family, exposure to family conflict, abuse, divorce, a new home or school, illness and hospitalisation, death of a loved one, parental drug exposure and maternal depression – 19% of primary school students in primary school nurture groups and 42% in secondary school have a diagnosed psychiatric disorder, most commonly ADHD¹.

What are the outcomes for nurture groups?

Outcomes for children and other learners

● Greater academic attainment: Children and young people attending nurture groups have been shown in quasi non-randomised trials to have significant gains in academic attainment as measured by their total scores on their baseline assessment.² This includes improvements in metacognition skills³ and language and literacy skills.⁴


Personal development, behaviour and welfare

- **Improved behaviour:** Nurture groups resulted in an improvement in pupils’ behaviour and improved social skills at school and at home.
- **Improved attendance and reduced exclusions:** Nurture groups have proven to significantly improve attendance (a finding corroborated in Estyn publications) and significantly reduce exclusions.
- **Attachment to teachers, school and community:** Nurture groups help develop affective bonds between teachers and students, result in an increased nurturing ethos at school and result in positive attachments to schools and the community.
- **Long-term mental health improvements and resiliency:** Controlled studies have concluded that students with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties are significantly more likely to improve in social and emotional functioning by attending nurture group provision in school rather than remaining in their mainstream classroom, gains that were found to be maintained over time. One study found that children’s ‘Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire’ (SDQ) scores in the abnormal or borderline category improved by 29% to normal levels after three terms of nurture group provision compared to only 10% in the control group. Nurture groups promote good mental health as they help children feel valued, build confidence and self-esteem, teach children how to make good relationships with adults and each other, develop communication skills, provide opportunities for social learning and facilitate learning through quality play experiences.

> “Attendance improves with nurture and since the nurture group was formed, there have been no exclusions at all … [this is because of] the impact nurture has on vulnerable children and families.”
> Infant and Nursery School Headteacher, Warwickshire.

How do nurture groups work?

- A nurture group is a small group of 6 to 12 children or young people supported by two trained adults. Nurture groups are, on average, provided 5 times a week for 2.5 hours a day per child and are the only intensive psychosocial intervention available full-time whilst allowing students to remain a part of their mainstream class. Placements in the nurture group can be either short or medium-term with the average pupil returning fully to their mainstream classes between two and four terms. Both part-time and full-time nurture groups have been found to work well and nurture groups are effective in both primary and secondary school settings.

- Teaching staff trained in the theory and practice of nurture groups create an attractive, safe, structured environment, usually within the context of a mainstream educational setting, with a number of areas and

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13 O'Connor, Tina and John Colwell (2002). The effectiveness and rationale of the ‘nurture group’ approach to helping children with emotional and behavioural difficulties remain within mainstream education. British Journal of Special Education, Volume 29, Issue 2,
resources designed to bridge the gap between home and school. Not only does sharing the nurture group environment with other students help the pupils practice social skills that are fundamental to their reintegration into mainstream classes, it also prevents any inappropriate attachment between themselves and nurture group staff; the goal of nurture group is not to usurp the parent-child relationship, but to create a positive attachment to the school. The nurture group staff engage intensely with each student, within a daily routine that is explicit, uniform and predictable; activities undertaken include emotional literacy sessions, news-sharing, group activities, curriculum tasks and nurture breakfast.

Nurture Groups in Welsh national policy

Wales

There are 144 nurture groups on Wales. This is a ratio of 1 nurture group for every 11.8 schools.

- The Welsh Government published ‘Nurture Groups: A handbook for schools’ (2010)\(^\text{16}\), which outlines how to set up and run a nurture group, as well as providing an overview of how they operate.
- The Department for Education and Skills’ ‘Inclusion and Pupil Support Guidance’ (2006)\(^\text{17}\) highlights the use of nurture groups as an effective strategy in aiding pupils who are experiencing behaviour and attendance issues.
- Estyn’s recent report on ‘Attendance in Secondary Schools’ (2014) recommends nurture groups as an intervention.\(^\text{18}\) They described nurture groups as a multi-agency strategy that can engage the families of vulnerable new learners and create a welcoming environment where children can learn with their families.

Costs and funding

Most nurture groups cost less than £10,000 for schools to establish. As shown by a recent survey of nurture groups in schools, the most popular option in terms of funding for nurture group provision is annually via the Pupil Deprivation Grant, followed by Local Authority funding and then by individual school funding streams, Government funding or a combination of these different sources.

About the Nurture Group Network

The Nurture Group Network is a charity that aims to break cycles of low achievement and tackle social exclusion by ensuring that an unequal start in life does not mean an unequal chance to engage with learning. The Nurture Group Network works to ensure that every disadvantaged or disengaged child has access to a nurturing intervention to equip them with the skills and resilience they need to make the most of learning and school. We do this by supporting the development of nurturing interventions in schools through training, resources and support; making the case for nurture in schools with policymakers and politicians; and has an on-going research and evaluation programme to monitor evidence of outcomes. For further information please visit: [http://www.nurturegroups.org](http://www.nurturegroups.org)

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